



ELEMENTARY TO HIGH SCHOOL

OPINION: Three ways to help students who switch schools midyear

Multiple district transfers can erode a student's achievement and confidence

by **QUENTINA TIMOLL**
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It's never easy to be the new kid in school, especially if it happens multiple times in a school year and comes with added stress from outside school.

Students who change schools during the academic year are more likely to fall behind in school and experience a loss in their sense of confidence and belonging. Studies [show](#) that this is the case for millions of students. While there are various reasons why students change schools, many do so for involuntary reasons, like housing instability or homelessness.

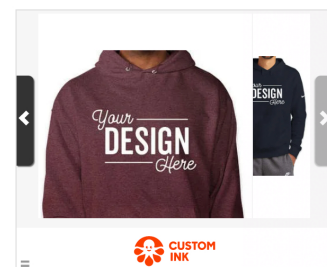
At East Baton Rouge Parish Schools in Louisiana, we've been wrestling with how we can better serve the significant number of students who fall into this category. Our overall student mobility [rate](#) is already high at 22 percent, but for schools with lower rates of student achievement (classified under "Comprehensive Intervention Required" status), that rate climbs to 49 percent.

Percent change in the number of homeless students in U.S. public schools over six years (2007/08 to 2012/13)



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(Zoom in and click on any state to see actual numbers of homeless students and annual percentage changes for each state. This is an interactive Google Fusion map, created by Jill Barshay and Sarah Butrymowicz of The Hechinger Report.)

We've approached this problem, shared by many urban schools, in a focused and deliberate way. For the past year and a half, we've started to dive deeply into our data, learning from principals and staff what's working and trying out promising interventions in more schools. We're far from "solving" this issue — it's complex and hard to tackle. But we've learned a few things that might be helpful to other districts that also have high numbers of transient students.

1. Offer access to more magnet schools and specialized programs that aren't restricted by residence. To reduce the number of students moving in and out of schools, we've opened more magnet programs within schools to allow students to continue attending their schools even if they move to new neighborhoods. For some families, being part of a magnet program may provide that draw to stay at their old school, even if it's not as close as a new school would be.

We're also investing in more career and technical education programs — from sports medicine, digital media and commercial aquaponics to carpentry, HVAC and electrician careers — that are open to students across the district. This fall, we are opening a new career technical center that allows students to attend their regular high schools for half a day, then come to the center to work on a medical or industrial certification. Even if a student changes high schools, he or she will still be a part of this career program.

By providing both neighborhood school options for families and offering more magnet and academy options where families can opt into specific programs at schools outside their home attendance zone, we hope to provide more transient students with stable school experiences while at the same time expanding educational options for all.

2. Look at the problem in more than one way, and measure accordingly. Districts and states measure a school's mobility rate cumulatively: we count the total number of students who have enrolled in school and the total number of exits in one year, then divide. But this number doesn't tell the full story. Take a student who leaves to go to another school two weeks after the school year starts, then comes back a month later, then leaves again only to return after winter break. The mobility rate doesn't capture the impact that these multiple moves might have on the student. In addition, the mobility rate gives an inaccurate picture of what's happening at the school, as this one student is counted multiple times.

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This cumulative number is important, but we think it's equally important to measure how many kids start on the first day of school and stay in that same school the whole year — what we call the "persistence enrollment rate." For some schools with high mobility rates, their persistence rate might actually show that they have a majority of their students stay with them throughout the year, despite what the mobility rate suggests.



In East Baton Rouge, we now look at these two data-sets side by side. They help us identify who our most mobile students are, or which students might be moving in and out of the same school in a single year. We can then figure out the best interventions to support these students.

3. Provide students and educators with access to high-quality curriculum resources and space to build community with one another. We think it's important to let schools pick their own instructional materials based on their needs. The problem we ran into, however, was that we had many different curricula and interventions in schools with high mobility rates. This meant that students who were moving to new schools during the school year did not have access to consistent instructional materials, which made it difficult for them to progress.

As part of our plan for the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, we've selected a common set of instructional resources across the district to best serve our students. We're not taking away autonomy from schools — we're just trying to ensure that schools are selecting from a set of options that the district can support. This way, we know that students who move from school to school will at least have consistency in their learning materials.

We've also seen a group of elementary principals coming together informally on a regular basis to share information about students, particularly those who are most transient, and work together to engage families. This way, the school network comes together to problem-solve and troubleshoot for students and families, making it more likely that families stay plugged into their schools and that students' needs are met regardless of which schools they attend within the parish.

The guiding principle we follow to tackle our student mobility challenge is to provide our families with choices both within and beyond their assigned schools. This helps us maintain a connection to our students and families, minimize disruption to student learning and increase their chances for success.

Dr. Quentina Timoll is assistant superintendent of East Baton Rouge Parish Schools in Louisiana. She is a member of City Year's new [District Learning Network](#), an initiative that brings cohorts of senior leaders from City Year's partner school districts across the country together as a learning community to better support student and school success.

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